Deneb Board

It's not that often I have something directly Amiga-related to talk about in this newsletter, at least not as much as I used to. I have something worth mentioning today, however. Thanks in no small part to Mr. Chris Hodges, I am the proud owner of a new Deneb board for my Amiga 4000. For those who may not have heard already, Deneb is the latest, and arguably best card to give "big box" Amiga systems USB capability. Sadly, my Amiga 4000T is too bulky, heavy, and fragile for me to trust bringing the thing to a meeting, so I'll just have to give my impressions here instead.

The Deneb board itself, designed by Michael Bohmer, is rather small, at least by Amiga card standards, only about the size it needs to be to fit in a Zorro II/III slot. The fit is not completely snug, so the board may wobble a bit when seated depending on the forces applied to it. When it's properly wired in, that shouldn't be much of a problem, though the manual recommends inserting some heavy paper or other isolating material between cards if it looks likely something may touch and cause a short.

On the board is an FPGA chip which houses the USB control and other logic, and several smaller chips, including the board flash ROM. There are three USB connections, pins that, with the included connectors, place two USB ports in a blanking plate out the back of the system, and one standard USB port mounted on the board itself. There is an A-1200 clock port connector, allowing the use of boards that require it, and a block of jumper pins. As shipped, the board is set in "rescue" mode, which allows access to protected areas of the flash ROM for firmware upgrades and the installation software. It should be noted that the Deneb does not include any software on CD or floppy disk (it might be available online or through other means – I don't know) and relies on the software tucked into the ROM on the board itself, which should be accessible when the Deneb is installed with that "rescue" jumper on. This was a bit of an issue for me, as more often than not my Amiga couldn't read the flash ROM as it was supposed to. I don't know if it was an irregularity with the board or my Amiga, but with a lot of fiddling, I was able to get into the ROM and install the included software. At this point it pays to be aware of your Amiga's hardware configuration to determine which libraries are used, notably whether you are using the board in a Zorro II (A2000 and certain setups) or Zorro III (A3000 and A4000), and whether or not it can support DMA data transfer. (As my A4000T was making full use of its built-in SCSI-2 for drives and more, I had to settle for PIO mode for the USB, which means all transfers are handled by the CPU). At this point, you would remove the jumper from the board and use it normally.

The software for the Deneb is written by Chris Hodges and, along with drivers and libraries, primarily consists of Poseidon, the USB driver stack, and Luciferin, the tool to manage the board Flash ROM contents. I'm familiar with Poseidon from the role it plays in MorphOS, and I can say it's a marvel, giving the Amiga (Pegasos, emulation, or any other supported system) seamless support for USB devices near-equal to any Windows PC or Mac – better in some instances. With support for a wide array of storage devices, keyboards, mice, tablets, game controllers, cameras, and several other devices, it's a good bet that if it's USB and doesn't require a bunch of custom Windows software installed, you can probably use it. Poseidon allows a generous amount of customizing for your settings as well. Luciferin is the flash ROM management tool, for the 4 megabytes of flash memory on the Deneb board. This small chunk of memory allows you store programs and data meant to be usable even before the hard drive spins up. A possible example is the Poseidon libraries, which make it possible to use USB input devices before the computer is fully booted, or even boot the system from a USB storage device. One might also put "ROM tags" in the flash memory, or put a complete dump of the Kickstart ROM on the flash, to speed up the system boot and/or eliminate the "double clutch" rebooting required for Amiga as 3.5 or 3.9. Included as initial content on the flash ROM is the Amiga-runnable version of the animation "Still Alive" by yours truly. It can be played when Luciferin is run, or downloaded and run separately. I thank Chris for the opportunity given me to have it included.

To give a brief example of what this flash can offer, one of the first things you see on the first "normal" startup with everything installed is a large "DENEB" logo being burned into the screen, much in the style of early Amiga game logos. It's fun to see, but seeing it every time the Amiga starts gets tiring, so thankfully it can be removed when you update the flash ROM with Luciferin. On my Amiga, I replaced the "DENEB" intro (as opposed to having nothing) with something that plays a short musical ditty like that played by the original Amiga 1000. I mentioned earlier that my system does not seem to access the flash ROM as it should, and that is currently still the case. Luciferin reports that the Deneb board has its jumper disabling the flash ROM set when it doesn't. I'll investigate more in the

future, but as I find the USB support, which is working brilliantly, the most important aspect, I will not be too concerned if I'm unable to resolve the flash ROM situation.

As it stands, the Deneb is a little pricey, as is a lot of Amiga-specific hardware, but it is truly a quality piece of work, and I'm finding it invaluable. It has made it much simpler to transfer files between the Amiga and my other systems via flash drives. At Zorro III and USB 2.0 speeds, it's quite zippy as well. I have installed a hub into a drive bay, so I have a set of USB ports in the front of the case. I have also used some flash drives to back up all the files from the Amiga's (now) modest 9 gigabyte hard drive. It's fun to see what represents years of my Amiga work and activities reduced to a few devices roughly the size of a pack of gum. If you have an Amiga that you still make use of with a free Zorro slot, and you don't have another USB card installed, you can't really go wrong with the Deneb. Even with the minor problems I've had, I recommend it wholeheartedly.

...by Eric Schwartz
from The AmiTech-Dayton Gazette, June 2008

Music Rights

Ever since I interviewed the RIAA and wrote a column detailing the true nature of that horrible organization, I've kept myself abreast of all the news that shapes our understanding of piracy and anything that surrounds it. And after reading an article in ArsTechnica earlier today where it cites a survey, which suggests that "people aged 14 to 24 still love their music and are willing to pay for it — but only on their own terms," I was excited to see what would happen next.

According to the survey by British Music Rights — an organization that represents the music industry — 80 percent of P2P users said they would gladly pay for a file-sharing service that allows them to download DRM-free songs as often as they'd like for a flat rate per month. And although you may have expected British Music Rights to condemn the results of this study as more proof that we're living in a world of foolhardy pirates, the organization was actually quite happy with the outcome.

"The music industry should draw great optimism from this groundbreaking survey," said Feargal Sharkey, head of BMR. "First and foremost, it is quite clear that this young and tech-savvy demographic is as crazy about and engaged with music as any previous generation. Contrary to popular belief, they are also prepared to pay for it, too. But only if offered the services they want."

Is it really possible that someone on the other side of the fence has finally seen the writing on the wall and realized that we're more than happy to pay for music and give artists the money they deserve as long as we're treated with the same respect? I simply can't believe it took this long for these dolts to figure it out. As I've said numerous times before, the vast majority if people who pirate music or movies really don't do it for the sheer act of stealing, but do so because the current offerings available to them simply don't offer what they're looking for.

Try as they might, organizations that represent the music industry can't indict individuals for stealing music for no good reason. Do people steal music? Sure. But if given the right outlet to download music legally, I sincerely doubt the issue would be such a big one like it is today. Let's face it — we want to be able to download music from the service of our choosing at a price that's not ridiculously high. $0.99 for one track off an album? Are you kidding me? It may have worked when the labels were forced to put those tracks onto physical media, but today, it's a matter of recording it and shipping it off. And lest you forget, we also want to be able to download DRM-free music so we can take that song and bring it with us wherever we would like to go. We did that with CDs, why can't we do that with a track off iTunes?

For some reason, we have created an environment that hates ownership and would rather see you lease property at a premium instead of own it at a reasonable price. And if you ask me, that's unacceptable.

Look, I'm not asking for much, just the opportunity to say that I own what I paid for and to be offered the courtesy to be trusted. Is that really too much to ask?

...by Don Reisinger
June 17, 2008
http://news.cnet.com/8301-13506_3-9970930-17.html?tag=cnetfd.mt

July Calendar

July 14 — Amiga By-The-Loop Chapter
7:00 pm — **Main** Grand Prairie Public Library
901 Conover Drive, Grand Prairie

July 14— MCCC Board of Director's Meeting
Approx. 9:15 pm — Location TBD

July 26 — Newsletter Deadline — 7:00 am